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## CRITICISM ON LEFT POPULISM

NONPOLITICS ŽIŽEK, LEFT POPULISM, MARXISM

Frederic Jameson is quite right when he writes that the substitution of economics by politics is the usual means of all attacks on Marxism, i.e. the liquidation of Marxist critique and analysis of the capital economy and the consequent concentration on the discourses of freedom, equality and political representation. Marxism itself was partly not very vigilant against such attacks; on the contrary, in the course of a discursive figure of the transformation of politics into the political, it joyfully accepted the invitation of the ruling classes to ultimately pursue exclusively representative politics.

In his essay "Lenin and Revisionism", Frederic Jameson defines the primacy of economics as determining in the final instance, which ultimately gives Marxism its strength and originality. Jameson insists that Marxism, in the unity of theory and practice, holds a completely different system of thought (beyond the theories of power and the political), whose reasonableness and radical critical faculty only come fully to bear today when capitalization tends to encompass everything, at least in the capitalist core countries. After all, every arbitrary monetary stream of expected profits is now regarded as a parameter of capitalization that potentially permeates every singular aspect of social fields – the dominant corporations constantly capitalize human life, social networks, social habits, bodies and genetic codes, affects, wars, and much more, when they can generate income and returns with it. Jameson writes: "At the moment it is clear that everything is economic again, even in the vulgar Marxist sense". It turns out that constellations that seem to be purely political questions or questions of power have become transparent enough to recognize the economic constellations in them. If both private debtors and states have to follow the demands of financial creditors without ifs and buts, then one can confidently assume that the strategies of neoliberal governments are less based on political decisions than on "necessary" monetary-oriented solutions that are prescribed by financial institutions when they can determine the prices of government bonds in the secondary markets.<sup>1</sup>

Zizek's accusation that Laclau/Mouffe and Badiou reduce the economy to the ontable and thus ignore the "ontological dignity" of the economy does not go far enough here, and much more, politicist philosophy and left-wing populism deprive the left of its (last) theoretical weapons.<sup>2</sup>

Zizek asserts that populism, no matter what kind of playwork is meant, concerns Lacan's objet a of politics, a special figure that stands for the universal dimension of the political. Populism is not a specific political movement, but the political in its pure form,

the “inflection” of the social fabric, which in principle can dispose of any political content. Thus its elements are initially purely formal.

Populism functions as a collecting movement constituted by the absorption of special “democratic” demands (for a better social policy, better education, tax cuts, against war and for the environment, etc.), whereby these demands should be lined up in a series of equivalences in such a way that with this kind of concatenation the “people” can emerge as the universal political subject. Populism is not only interested in the empirical content of these demands, but it is particularly pushing for the formal fact that the “people” can emerge as a political subject through the kind of concatenation and that consequently the struggles and antagonisms appear as parts of an antagonistic struggle between “us” (the people) and “them”. Hegemony is entirely aimed at the appropriation of this antagonism, which is why a number of resentments such as racism and anti-Semitism can occur in a populist series of equivalences.

For Laclau, populism indicates the transcendental matrix of an unfinishable struggle, the contents of which are ultimately determined by the contingent struggle for hegemony, while the “class struggle” uses a particular social group (the working class) as the privileged political actor. This privilege is not based on the hegemonic struggle, but on the objective social position of this group, which, according to Laclau, reduces the political struggle to an epiphenomenon of objective processes.

However, this is far too brief. It is precisely in this context that the authors of operaism distinguish between technical and political elements in the composition of the working class. While the technical composition is related to the organization of the class by capital (division of labor, management practices and the standardized use of machines, but also family and communal relations), the political composition affects the capacity of the working class, more precisely the proletariat, which is always related to the struggle for desires, inclinations and interests – collective actions of refusal, resistance and the partial appropriation of surplus value. According to the Italian theorist Panzieri, the increase in the organic composition of capital is not only based on the process of technological progress, but is also always to be understood as the result of a shock offensive of capital, in order finally to decompose the composition of the proletariat in terms of its political power. Just think of how the resistance of the qualified mass workers was broken by Taylorism and the assembly lines in Fordism, but also led again to a new technical composition of the class, with the possibility of stopping the assembly lines; there is also a relationship between the cycles of struggle and the circulation of capital, one thinks of interruptions of transport, logistics and infrastructure, of disturbances that, according to the operaists, extend beyond production to the entire social factory of life. With regard to the critique of operaism, the group Theory Communist (TC) has discussed the mistakes of the proletariat in the context of the reciprocal relationship between capital and the proletariat, a relationship that is not only to be understood as antagonistic, but in which the two poles are integrated within a single system. And this integration has intensified in the history of capitalism, through the politics of trade unions, social democratic and communist parties, and the politics of the welfare state, but also through the various self-government projects, state planning, and class self-management.

For Laclau, the fact that a particular struggle is elevated to a “universal equivalent” of all struggles is never determined, but is itself the result of the contingent political struggle for hegemony. In one historical situation this struggle can be the struggle of the workers, in another the patriotic struggle of the underdogs or the anti-racist struggle for cultural tolerance. No essential quality can lead to a singular struggle assuming a hegemonic role of the “general equivalent” of all struggles. The struggle for hegemony presupposes not only an irreducible gap between the universal form and the diversity of particular contents, but the contingent process through which one of these contents is transferred into the direct embodiment of this universal dimension in a specific situation. Laclau draws on linguistics and constructs the field of politics within the framework of an irreducible tension between “empty” and “floating” signifiers. Žižek writes: “Some certain signifiers begin to act as “empty”, as embodiments of the universal dimension, and include a large number of “floating” signifiers in the chain of equivalences they totalize. The elegance of this solution lies in the fact that it dispenses us from the boring subject of the alleged “deeper (totalitarian, natural) solidarity” between the extreme right and the “extreme” left. The first concerns his actual definition of populism: the series of formal conditions he enumerates are not sufficient justification for calling a phenomenon “populist”. The way in which populist discourse shifts antagonism and constructs the enemy must be added. In populism, the enemy is externalized or objectified into a positive ontological entity (even if that entity is spectral), the annihilation of which restores balance and justice. In mirror image, our own identity – that of the populist political actor – is also perceived as existing before the enemy attack”. The following conclusion can easily be drawn from this: The left-wing populists are not looking for structural causes in the capitalist system for the struggles, but for the corrupt intruder who has toxically infiltrated it (for example, the greedy financial speculator); the cause is not inscribed in the structure as such, but is an element that overrides its role within this structure so to speak and draws parasitic profits from it. Here, too, Žižek can be agreed: “For a Marxist, on the other hand (as for a Freudian), the pathological (deviant misconduct of some elements) is a symptom of the normal, an indicator of what is normal in this structure, which is threatened by “pathological” outbreaks, is wrong. For Marx, economic crises are the key to understanding the “normal” functioning of capitalism; for Freud, pathological phenomena, such as hysterical outbursts, are the key to the constitution (and the hidden antagonisms that maintain functioning) of a “normal” subject. Therefore, fascism is definitely populism. Its image of the Jew is the equivalent of a series of (heterogeneous and even inconsistent) threats experienced by individuals: The Jew is too intellectual, dirty, sexually insatiable, hard working, financially exploitative, etc..”

The left-wing populists try to change the feeling as it is staged by the right-wing populists when they turn against the

establishment. They assume that the election of right-wing populist politicians is by no means the result of deep-seated racism, but that the sections of the population that are so obsessively engaged in the question of borders and refugees have a deep powerlessness that has to be turned into anger and projected onto the global financial elite instead of onto refugees. One should therefore not lose sight of these rightly angry but misguided masses. The left-wing populists logically try to channel anger into a "healthy revolt" against the global financial elite.

For Mouffe, the dominance of financial capitalism over liberal democracies has reduced the scope and use of political debate to nothing more than competition between like-minded groups that proclaim themselves to be more efficient in attracting investors. This has shifted the focus from social inequality or the social question to the suppression of state sovereignty by the financial elites, to which the right-wing populists refer in a more or less demagogic way. Consequently, according to Mouffe, the left would now also have to shift its priorities in order to be able to oppose the right-wing populists more decisively by again demanding the sovereign power of the state over the elites.

The future belongs to those who take up democratic demands that have perished in the consensus of the political organizations of the mainstream, which reads "There is no alternative". To prevent the right-wing populists from benefiting from resistance to the dictates of the financial elites, the fixation on the outdated left-right axis must be overcome and, much like the right-wing populists, the priority of vertical division between underdogs and those in power must be recognized. At the same time, in order to reduce the electoral success of the right-wing populists, anti-fascist alliances must also be forged with those forces that are in favor of maintaining the status quo. A progressive policy must also integrate those who vote for the right, because they are misguided democrats whose legitimate feelings of dependence could be diverted.

The movement from a horizontal to a vertical axis of political polarization is not the only common feature of the two populist movements with which they mirror each other. To the extent that both movements put a policy that remains focused on elections first, both left-wing populists and right-wing populists seek to construct a "people" that wins hegemony over neoliberal elites through parliamentary struggle. It is necessary to combat the complicity of governments with those who exert direct influence on the state through the trading of government bonds and transform this condition into the antagonism between "those up there" and "us".

The "we" that the right-wing populists construct along ethnic lines of descent and through the condensation of xenophobic affects is hardly compatible with a leftist policy that refers to the coalition of democratic demands fed by discriminated minorities, exploited wage earners, and downgraded middle classes. What is more, if one examines the mode of construction of the people, there are undeniable similarities between right-wing and left-wing populism: not only can all populist movements refer to the rejection of illegitimate elites, they also share the view that it is only possible to create this common "we" if credible authority figures articulate a new policy in public (which ones?), summarize affects, and thus attack their opponents.

The fact that liberal institutions have not prevented capital markets from infiltrating democratic areas is undeniable. It is precisely at this point that a comprehensive policy of counter-speculation would have to be set in motion, which, among other things, would specifically target the lobbying of financial capital in the state apparatuses and not simply fuel resentment against the establishment. A discursive strategy that concentrates on "us against those up there", which Carl Schmitt has already brought into play, is a much more suitable condition for a policy of reactionary movements. For both right-wing and left-wing populism, the free flow of goods and capital is merely a means by which the elites enforce rules and power against "us", while the free flow of populations remains controversial, and this in turn enables a policy that sets in motion the patriotism of the "we" and the people, a racism from below, which the right-wing populists can serve much more effectively than the left-wing populists.

When the propagandists of left-wing populism then seek a new politics of affect, they deliberately overlook the difference between active and reactive affects, or worse, they deliberately mix them. Thus, in right-wing populism, resentment is an affective substance of antagonistic politics that is not about inequality, but about the feeling that others enjoy what de jure belongs to me and that the wrong people are "up there" in power. A policy that does not distinguish between active and reactive affects is no less toxic in the democratic factory than the anti-populist establishment that tries to deprive people of power, especially by positioning the patriotism of the popular classes against the alleged cosmopolitanism of elites. The "we" that is always imagined is a political calculation that the right-wing populists can serve much better than the left-wing populists.

Therefore, it is also quite absurd to suspect even communist potentials in left-wing populism. Mark Fisher writes: "Communist potentials are only realised once a movement has ceased to be populist, since populism is that which, by definition, is always satisfied with making demands of the Master. That is because populism isn't proto-fascistic; rather – and this, surely, is the implicit element in Žižek's argument that needs to be drawn out in order to make it work – it always takes the form of a hysterical liberalism."has The wide range of left-wing authors continues to focus clearly on the analysis of semiologies of signification as regards the problems of the financial functioning of capital, machine/technology and subjectivation. And this is all the more astonishing because today a myriad of machines, which can certainly be described as constant social capital, have long since occupied our everyday lives by more than just assisting our modes of perception and affects, our cognition, even by increasingly controlling and regulating them.

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1The hegemony of credit affects not only the private sector but also national governments, which now need to make their national location more attractive for financial capital. In order to increase the competitiveness of their companies in a global environment where financial capital can freely circulate, states must make their territory as attractive as possible for international investors by safeguarding property rights. At the same time, governments and political parties are forced to organise their re-election, which since the 1980s has contributed to the fact that states are now increasingly financing themselves by issuing government bonds instead of taxes, i.e. firing up government debt in order not to increase the tax burden for the population too much and not to completely reduce the welfare state. Thus, states and their governments constantly increase their dependence on the financial markets, which are then praised for promoting the economic discipline of the agents they credit to the satisfaction of all. To forestall the distrust of bond markets, which is expressed in rising interest rates on government bonds, governments must increase the flexibility of labour markets, cut social programs, reduce capital taxes and reduce any serious regulation of financial markets. In the 1990s, however, public debt, which was supposed to compensate for the loss of tax revenues, reached such proportions that private lenders worried about the solvency of states that social benefits had to be further reduced and sections of the population dependent on public services were encouraged to take out loans to compensate for the lack of social benefits.

2 Maurizio Lazzarato is quite right when he writes in his last book *Signs and Machines* that contemporary critical-philosophical theory (Badiou, Negri, Butler, Laclau/Mouffe Ranciere, Accelerationists, etc.), in the course of its arrest in the hegemonic linguistic discourse, ignores facts such as the specific socio-economic operations of the machines, machinic enslavement and a-significant semiotics in nuce.

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